



Monsieur Lévy's Working Holiday

The anti-anti-American French philosopher survives the New York press
by Brendan Bernhard

“Hah hah hah . . .”

Al Franken was laughing the self-satisfied laugh of a man whose book is No. 1 on The New York Times best-seller list. Christiane Amanpour, looking much prettier than when she's standing on top of a hotel in Baghdad, was shaking hands. And Tina Brown was getting ready for the next segment, studying cue cards as her blond hair was sculpted and sprayed, as powder was brushed gently across her lips.

“Remember Bill Clinton?” Franken was saying to someone or other, his voice booming across the room. “Well? Hah hah hah. Eight years of an expanded economy.”

“Yeah, but everything burned out, it was too fast —”

“Read my book,” Franken shot back.

We were in a suite of rooms above Patroon, a restaurant on East 46th Street in New York, where Franken, Amanpour and former Pentagon official Victoria Clarke had just taped a conversation for Topic [A] With Tina Brown, the talk show on CNBC. Up next was Bernard-Henri Lévy, France's premier celebrity intellectual, who was practically anonymous amid this minor constellation of American media stars. He was smarter than the lot of them, and better-looking too, but this was Manhattan, not the Café Flore or the Boulevard Saint-Germain. What was he doing here?

The short answer: plugging a book. *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, Lévy's investigation into the abduction and murder of The Wall Street Journal reporter at the hands of Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan, is a riveting real-life geopolitical thriller. Planting himself front and center in his narrative, Lévy takes the reader through Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Britain, and even Los Angeles and upstate New York as he tries to piece together how Pearl

was kidnapped and why he was killed. His controversial conclusion is that Pearl was murdered not only for the “crime” of being Jewish, but also because he had learned too much about the secret alliance between the ISI, Pakistan’s secret-service agency, and al Qaeda. Given that Pakistan has a nuclear bomb, this is a serious and frightening charge.

But there were quasi-diplomatic reasons for Lévy’s presence as well. Basically, these boiled down to two. The first was his wish to pay tribute, as a French intellectual, and as a calculated gesture of friendship from one nation to another, to Daniel Pearl, the man he called “a great American journalist” and “my posthumous friend.” The second was to alert Americans, again as an act of good will, to his belief that the real danger that confronted them lay not, as George W. Bush seems to think, in the deserts of Iraq, but in the alleyways and mosques and madrasahs of our ally Pakistan, which he calls the biggest rogue state of them all, an immense breeding ground for holy war, a country soaked in “the stench of the apocalypse.”

In short, this was no ordinary media blitz. As an occasional emissary of French President Jacques Chirac, and a good friend of Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, Lévy was trying to tell us something.

“What is it about the death of an American journalist that called out to a French philosopher?” asked Tina Brown as the cameras rolled. “Why have you written this book?”

“I think I was really struck by the very imagery,” Lévy replied, referring to the infamous video Pearl’s kidnappers made of their victim as they slit his throat. “I saw the video — this famous and horrible video — where you see, at the beginning of this new century, a Jewish man killed in front of a camera, and compelled before dying to say, ‘My mother is Jewish, my father is Jewish, I am Jewish.’”

By this point in his trip, Lévy was well into the swing of things. His heavily accented English, which had been rusty when he arrived in New York 36 hours earlier, was picking up. The vocabulary was coming back. At one point, he even said “bullshit” on air — he pronounced it boolsheet — and Tina Brown smiled and carried on.

“My English was not too pitiful?” Lévy wondered aloud after the segment had been shot.

“It was fabulous! It was romantic!” a rather unromantic-looking female production assistant answered, momentarily transformed.

No surprise there. Lévy, who is rarely seen in public wearing anything other than a black suit and unbuttoned white tuxedo shirt, is a romantic figure. He looks like a Gallic crooner far more than he does a philosopher, which, technically, is what he is. At 53 he is still impressively handsome, with a mane of only slightly graying black hair, and like a rock star, he often wears dark glasses indoors.

His wife, the French actress Arielle Dombasle, is still remembered fondly in America for an episode of *Miami Vice* in which she dunked her white T-shirt in ice-cold Perrier before putting it on over her bikini top. She also delivered a line of memorably bad dialogue in the same episode, telling Sonny Crockett, “I’ll be everything you want, everything you need, everything you need to want and want to need.”

This was pretty much Lévy’s credo during his week in New York. Whatever the Americans wanted of him, he was going to try to deliver it, even when he couldn’t understand a word they were saying. The night before, he had appeared on *Live From the Headlines*, a news show on CNN hosted by Paula Zahn, and he claimed afterward that he hadn’t caught the questions. Zahn spoke too fast.

As an introduction to the American television audience — it was his first appearance of the trip — the interview with Zahn was predictably disappointing. This being a typically hurried news show, there simply wasn’t time to give the audience a sense of who this particular Frenchman was, to run down a few items of his biography. Zahn didn’t even mention that he was the most important member of a small but influential group of French thinkers who call themselves “anti-anti-American.” Not pro-American, necessarily — Lévy considers the Iraq war a folly, for example — but resolutely opposed to the hatred of the U.S. that has swept the world.

So a little context would have been welcome, if only as an act of politeness. After all, Lévy had just spent a year of his life putting himself in harm’s way in order to investigate the death of an American at a time when the governments of France and America were barely on speaking terms. Though his nationality and political

contacts would probably have saved him, it's not inconceivable that he too might have ended up having his throat cut, with the resultant videotapes sold (as Lévy says the Pearl tape is sold) outside mosques in Pakistan. After all, if Pearl was "overintrusive," as Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf claimed, Lévy was even more so.

The next television interview, with Fox & Friends, turned out better — much to everyone's surprise. Lévy's publisher, Dennis Johnson of Melville House, was uneasy about his author appearing on such a right-wing station and said he would turn down an invitation from The O'Reilly Factor if one came in. (He was afraid O'Reilly would try to tear Lévy to pieces.) And now in the green room, watching the segment before Lévy's — a conversation with a loudmouth DJ called Mancow — he looked like someone who'd just realized he'd made a horrendous mistake. Throwing his delicate French import into this den of lions! Ashen, he gazed at the television nervously.

"What if, hidden behind the gruesome murder of Daniel Pearl, was another, still-darker story?" intoned host Steve Doocy as the segment began. "What if he was killed because he was a reporter who was on to something?" "Well, joining us right now is a man who knows," chimed in co-host Brian Kilmeade. "He's from France, from Paris in particular — BERNARD-ONREE LEEVEE! Welcome, Mr. Onree Leevee, appreciate your comin' down."

Uncertain about the joshing tone of this introduction, Lévy merely nodded his head in response. For a moment there was some European-vs.-American tension in the room. The French philosopher, immaculately dressed but neglecting to wear a tie; the two Murdochian anchormen, bright but uncultured, or concealing whatever culture they had for the sake of ratings. But with his answer to the first question — "What did you discover about who killed Pearl?" — Lévy dissolved any lingering uneasiness.

"I discovered a few things," he began, his voice soft, his demeanor earnest. "I spent one year of my life walking in his footsteps and trying to rebuild his last days, his last hours, and the biography of the criminals . . ."

It was a clever way to respond. How could you attack a Frenchman — even here, at French-Bashing Central —

for spending a year of his life trying to solve the mystery of an American's death? (Especially when no American had done so.) But, as it turned out, Doocy and Kilmeade had no desire to attack him. The interview was brisk but also concise, touching on all the important topics like a power-point presentation. In five or six minutes, you actually got a pretty decent idea of what the book was about. By the end of the interview, the temperature in the room had warmed up considerably.

"Great book, important book, and you tell it wonderfully," Kilmeade concluded. "Great job. We thank you very much for joining us."

"Thanks to you," Lévy replied. "Glad to be here."

Smiles all round. Doocy even threw in an "au revoir."

"They have electricity, juice," Lévy said of the Fox people when we were back out on the sidewalk. "You look in their eyes and you see enthusiasm, dynamism. I don't agree with what they say, but . . ."

"Did they seem friendly?"

"They looked friendly. When they said I was French, I was about to say, 'Nobody's perfect.'" Lévy laughs. "Of course, the interview was very short, but this is the American style. It obliges you to be sharp."

"Do you enjoy that?"

"No. I'm a man of writing. I need space, I need to breathe. But I will never be one of those writers who complain about the bad treatment they get on TV."

Of course, most writers never get on TV in the first place. For Lévy, publicity is not a problem. (In France, where he is known simply by his initials, BHL, he is on TV all the time.) In 1977, when he published his most famous book, *Barbarism With a Human Face*, while still in his 20s, he landed the cover of *Time* magazine and Johnny Carson invited him on *The Tonight Show*. Lévy had an America-friendly message back then, too. *Barbarism*, which sealed his reputation as the leading member of a group called "The New Philosophers," was a fierce attack on Stalinism and the hard-line French left typified by Jean-Paul Sartre, who, according to legend, promptly denounced him as a CIA agent.

Back at the Carlyle Hotel, where he was staying, Lévy drank Lapsang Souchong tea, munched wafer-thin sandwiches and talked about his book. Hovering in the background, Dennis Johnson kept his eye on the clock. “The investigation was hard work. It made me nervous sometimes! To be Jewish in Pakistan is not the most comfortable position you can have. But I did it. I was sort of possessed during those 12 months. I dreamed of Daniel Pearl, I dreamed of his murderers. I felt that the story was a huge one — politically, symbolically, as important as the collapse of the World Trade Center. For me, the 21st century begins with the [assassination] of Ahmed Shah Masoud and moderate Islam in Afghanistan on September 9, 2001; the collapse of the twin towers on September 11; and the death of Daniel Pearl [in January, 2002]. The new stakes of the century are here, in this triumvirate.”

Lévy believes that Islamic fundamentalism must be fought, but his position is nuanced, complex and politically unclassifiable. Repeatedly during his trip, he emphasized that most victims of Islamic terrorism were themselves Muslim, and insisted that, contra Samuel Huntington, the real “clash of civilizations” was not between Islam and the West, but between extremist and moderate Muslims. “It is not a battle between people, it’s much more insidious than that,” he said. “The clash is inside the mind of each Muslim.” Our job, he believes, is to encourage the moderates, as he tries to do in the concluding chapter of his book, which is titled “Gentle Islam.”

How sure is Lévy that the terrorist threat is real? I asked. If there are so many al Qaeda members itching to blow up our cities, why aren’t they doing so?

Could the war on terrorism be a massive overreaction? “I don’t dare think that,” Lévy replied. “There will be some new acts of terrorism, maybe even worse than the collapse of the twin towers. You are right when you say that [they’re not doing anything]. In Paris, they could blow up the Eiffel Tower, and they don’t do it, so it means they are not so clever as they think. But one act of terrorism can go through, and one is enough. The intention is there.”

Lévy had to leave again. On the day’s schedule he still had the last of three telephone interviews to do (he would conduct one of them, with Phil Fink of Shalom America, a radio show in Cleveland, stretched out on the hotel bed with his eyes closed), as well as an interview with Scott Simon on National Public Radio, another with a reporter from the Toronto Globe & Mail, a meeting with the editor

of the New York Review of Books, and a three-hour dinner with New York Observer columnist Ron Rosenbaum, who would interview him for C-SPAN at the Overseas Press Club the following night.

Two days later he appeared on Charlie Rose, whose other guest was Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations. Lévy and Haass chatted about Pakistan in the green room, and when Rose asked Haass on air if he agreed with Lévy's analysis of that country, Haass replied, "Alas, I think he's right." Afterward, requests for more copies of the book, which had already been sent to Bush, Cheney, Powell, Wolfowitz, et al., came in from Washington, D.C. To some extent, Lévy was having an effect.

At the end of the week, I caught up with Lévy again at the Carlyle. Looking tired, and still in makeup from an appearance on MSNBC earlier that morning, he was sitting in the dining room drinking his usual tea. There was one more television appearance to go (on Fox, which had him on three times, more than any other channel), and then he was flying back to France.

Having recently been in Europe myself, where I'd gotten an earful about American foreign policy, been informed that 9/11 was "a tragic, but necessary corrective," and quizzed repeatedly as to whether I'd read Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*, I asked Lévy about Europe's Bush obsession. Wasn't going on about "Bush the Cowboy" also a way of concealing a much deeper, and mostly unspoken, fear of militant Islam, particularly as it may exist in the West? After all, Daniel Pearl's kidnapper, Omar Sheikh, was English — born and raised in Britain, and educated at the London School of Economics (as were two other al Qaeda operatives).

"Yes, there is also cowardice," Lévy agreed. "Hoping to have peace with these sorts of people if we tell them, 'Well, okay, we are not at war with you, our enemy is Bush,' and so on. There is a hope to appease the monster, to appease the beast. Which is always a miscalculation. Europe did that with Hitler, Europe did that with communism, Europe does that with radical Islamism. Very few people in Europe accept to face their stake in the rise of Islamism; very few take the measure of the threat. And the people who do it, unfortunately, do it often in a stupid way. I think about Oriana Fallaci, for instance, who is a racist." (Fallaci's *The Rage and the Pride* is a ferocious attack on radical Islam, and what she sees as Italy's capitulation to it.)

“Well, she’s hysterical, surely.”

“Racist. Racist. It is a racist book.”

“But do you think she is necessarily racist, or just the book is racist?”

“The book is racist. No, she was not . . . I knew her a long time ago, I had friendship and respect. And I was so sad when I discovered this scream of hate.”

“But doesn’t the silence of people who would rather talk about Bush than Islam contribute to the hysteria of a woman like Fallaci? In other words, if more people were being courageous . . .”

Lévy cut me off. “The hysteria of a great woman is never explainable or forgivable. There is no excuse to be a racist, never. There is no excuse for anti-Semitism. There is no excuse for racism. Now, you raise another question. It is true that what was very shocking in France during the war in Iraq was the demonstrations attacking Bush and Sharon without any word against Saddam. The main enemy of the pacifists was Bush and never Saddam. This was shocking. As if in the 1930s we had said that our enemy was Roosevelt and not Hitler.”

I asked Lévy what he thought of the American media, now that he’d experienced a week of it firsthand. Was it as docile as it’s often made out to be in Europe? To my surprise, he said he was impressed — by Larry King (whose show he watched every night in his hotel room), by Charlie Rose (“There is no show like Charlie Rose in France”), even by the fact that Ron Rosenbaum had taken the trouble to meet with him to discuss his book before interviewing him. (One got the impression from Lévy that French journalists are rather lazy.) Even allowing for what he called “the dark side,” namely the kind of wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am interviews he’d submitted to on cable (there were no requests for interviews with Lévy from ABC, NBC or CBS), he praised what he called the “resistance of the American media, and especially the press, in this strange society where everything is forgotten so quickly. There is a seriousness here which is the contrary of this bad reputation.”

Perhaps Lévy was being overly generous. An hour later he paid his final visit to the dark side, on Fox’s Weekend Live With Tony Snow. He gestured with his hands more than pundits usually do, and his French accent seemed

especially pronounced. By the end, Snow looked as if he was about to burst out laughing as he listened to Lévy expound on the clash of civilizations going on inside Musharraf's head.

“All right, famed philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, thank you for joining us,” Snow wrapped up hurriedly. “His latest book is *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* Stay with us, we'll be right back.”

And then, smirking broadly, he cut to a commercial.